

March 29, 1994

The Trial Lake Lodge John C. Clegg

The old cabin below the dam at Trial Lake had its drawbacks. It was not large enough to house a caretaker and his family. In the winter, one had to dig down through six to ten feet of snow to find the door and another hole had to be dug to clear the chimney. Seepage from the lake above made the ground around the cabin perpetually muddy, and better fit for mosquitoes than for men. Accordingly, a new cabin was built during the brief summers of 1926 and 1927 by Cardie Clegg and a helper or two, on the hill above, overlooking the lake.

The cabin was to support water storage projects. It was not a Ranger station, although Rangers used it on occasion, and fire-fighting equipment was kept there for the Forest Service. A great store of fire-wood as well as food was kept in the cabin for use in the winter and spring. Winter snow surveys in early years required walking twenty miles up the canyon on snow shoes, a trek of two days. The cabin was then a base for the two more days needed to complete the surveys on both the Main and the North Forks of the Provo River. Later with snowmobiles the survey still took two days, the cabin continuing to be used as a base of operation.

The reservoirs filled as snow melted from about mid April until early July. It was critical at this time to watch the reservoirs to make sure that spillways were clear of packed snow and driftwood. Water was released early from many of the reservoirs to keep them from filling before the spillways were sufficiently clear; this required many trips to the various reservoirs each year before snow was off the road. The road nearly always needed shovelling or plowing in order to be open as far as Trial Lake by the first of July, and it was not plowed at all before the end of World War II. A method of getting around to the lakes in the spring season was to get to the cabin somehow and sleep there over-night. At dawn a man could walk on the crusted snow without encumbering snow shoes, to wherever he needed to go, and get back to the cabin by about 10 a.m. To delay longer meant continually falling four or five feet into the sun-softened snow and crawling out wet and exhausted. It was often possible to hike to Long Lake, spend two hours shovelling its spillway, and get back near the cabin before the snow softened.

Although experience helped, it was not possible to predict every place that would need extra work in the spring. The amount of snow, the time of its melting, and the pattern of its melting varied from year to year. Only after reservoirs were full enough of water and free enough from snow and ice, would debris of all sorts float into and clog the spillways. Ice by itself could damage valve mechanisms and spillways. Without the cabin, it would have been extremely difficult to keep watch over the reservoirs at the critical time of their filling.

The new cabin with two stories was large enough to house the caretaker and a construction or maintenance crew. The hill where the cabin stood had no top soil--whatever had been there had gone into the structure of the dam. What remained was well drained argillite rock and gravel, so mud was not tracked indoors. The resulting dryness and exposure to wind kept mosquitoes away, and the lack of vegetation on the hill made the cabin relatively safe from forest fire although none ever threatened. Wind sometimes piled snow to the second story eaves on the south, but snowdrifts seldom accumulated on the east and west where the doors were.

The exposed location provided a pleasant view, but more important, it made the cabin visible from afar and enabled disoriented hikers to find their way back to this recognizable land-mark. Few people realize until they get lost that the appearance of virtually every mountain peak or lake in the Uintas is very different when viewed from a slightly different direction. The countryside traversed by hikers and fishermen does not look the same coming in as it did going out.

The location of the cabin was ideal in all respects except that water would not flow up to it from the spring in the gully two hundred yards to the north east. Until 1945 when a water-powered pump was installed, water was carried in buckets from the spring.

Cardie Clegg was the designer of the cabin. Architecturally it was a true log cabin--not the kind seen so often having uniform siding boards planed to a curved cross-section which only suggests the appearance of logs. The structural parts were made from local materials: that is, solid logs and rocks, held together by cement and a few bolts and spikes. Cardie knew the kind of structures that had collapsed under snow in the mountains, so he made it a principle that he must be able to "hang a beef from every rafter". The roof was held up primarily not by the log walls but by vertical timbers supporting rafters midway between the peak of the roof and the eaves.

The cabin was built simply to serve the needs of several united irrigation companies as has been explained, but other services became necessary with the opening of the automobile road. People came up for recreation--fishing, hiking, boating, camping. They came over a long, dusty, and barely passable road. (Kamas, the nearest town, had no paved roads in or out in any direction at that time.) Many visitors came unprepared and unable or unwilling to return to town, so they sought whatever else they needed at the cabin--matches, worms, aspirin, food, the telephone.... The pressure was so great that Cardie's wife, Marion, set up a counter in the front room from which she sold candy and soda pop. She also offered a small assortment of canned goods such as soup, beans, corned beef, evaporated milk, and a few vegetables. Not for sale but hard to withhold from those in need were other articles about the cabin. Gasoline, for instance, could be obtained by syphoning from the car. Tools were in demand, especially the axe and the shovel. The cabin, no longer private, took on the name of "Lodge."

Boats and upstairs rooms and beds were rented--horses too when they could be spared from their regular work with the reservoirs and for planting fish.

Anyone not employed in the area was called a camper regardless of his length of stay, and campers kept needing (and getting) help with flat tires, punctured oil pans, ruptured radiator hoses, dead batteries, etc.

Campers came in for treatment of sunburn and injuries. Fish hooks in ears were perhaps the most common complaint, but hooks got into more tender places too. First aid was provided for minor and severe accidents and broken bones. Tools were on hand for pulling porcupine quills from dogs and horses.

Meals were not offered to the public, but sometimes and somehow a few strangers could be found seated at supper with the Clegg family. Wet weather filled the front room with campers getting warm and dry by the fireplace. On a stormy evening there could be as many as fifty drenched people finding shelter and trying to sleep on the benches and floors of the lodge and in the spare rooms and beds upstairs.

Although the cabin was not a Ranger Station, it was so identified on some of the Government maps. Consequently, a lot of folks wanted to see "the Ranger" for all sorts of reasons. More than once it was to have someone who annoyed them arrested. Cardie, who was deputy sheriff of both Wasatch and Summit counties and a State game warden, would then pocket the appropriate badge, just in case he might need it, and go out and settle the matter. He never arrested anyone.

The telephone, when it worked at all, worked both ways. Campers called down for things they had forgotten--that is to be expected and taken in stride--but upcoming calls came too. These could mean that someone in this-or-that emergency needed someone else (the listener) to carry a message to so-and-so, believed to be wearing a blue jacket (somehow always blue), and camped at such-and-such a lake unless, of course, he had decided that fishing might be better at another of the fifty-six lakes in the area. Urgent requests are hard to dismiss, and after most of these nearly impossible searches succeeded, it was understood that Providence played a part.

The Trial Lake Lodge withstood 48 years of mountain weather until it was intentionally demolished in 1975. Its structure and roof never failed nor leaked as was the fate of some more elegant buildings in the same mountains. Thousands who remember it for rescue, shelter, or only for refreshment returned again and again to what they regarded as a place of natural, substantial beauty. Poets praised it in verse. Artists painted it. Photographers could not resist it. To some it was simply a haven from storm, figurative or atmospheric. To those who lived there, it was hard work, and in retrospect, a high point of their lives.